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AUTHOR Van Brunschot, Michelle; And Others
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ABSTRACT

Children's relationships with their peers become more intimate as they grow older, with girls tending to experience intimacy in their friendships at an earlier age than their male counterparts. The size, friendship composition, and activity of elementary school children's play groups were recorded in an attempt to identify probable environmental causes of gender differences in the development of intimacy among peers. The study sample consisted of 25 children (18 girls) between the ages of 6 and 7, 23 children (11 girls) between 8 and 9, and 38 children (15 girls) between 10 and 11. The children were observed during recess for 4 months. Study findings included the following: (1) boys played in larger groups than girls; (2) fifth grade girls' tendency to play in groups of four or more suggests that group size is not a likely explanation for gender differences in intimacy; (3) boys engaged in competitive play and girls in socializing activity with increasing age, suggesting that intimacy development may be linked to activity; (4) the friendship composition of fifth grade children's play groups indicated that socializing occurred most often among reciprocal friends, whereas competitive and physical games occurred in mixtures of friends and non-friends; and (5) differences in composition suggested that different activities may provide varying opportunities for intimate exchanges. (AC)

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ECOLOGICAL CONTRIBUTIONS TO GENDER DIFFERENCES IN INTIMACY AMONG PEERS

Michelle Van Brunschot, Lynne Zarbatany, & Kim Strang
University of Western Ontario, London, ON, Canada.

Poster presented at the Biennial Meeting of the Society for Research in Child Development, New Orleans, Louisiana

Abstract

The size, friendship composition, and activity of elementary school children's play groups were recorded in an attempt to identify probable environmental causes of gender differences in the development of intimacy among peers. Twenty-five 6-7 year-old (18 girls), 23 8-9 year-old (11 girls) and 38 10-11 year-old (15 girls) children were observed during recess for 4 months. Consistent with past research, boys played in larger groups than girls. However, fifth-grade girls' tendency to play in groups of four or more suggests that group size is not a likely explanation of gender differences in intimacy. In contrast, boys engaged in competitive play and girls in socializing activities with increasing age, suggesting that intimacy development may be linked to activity. The friendship composition of fifth-grade children's play groups indicated that socializing occurred most often among reciprocal friends, whereas competitive and physical games occurred in mixtures of friends and non-friends. Differences in composition suggest that different activities may provide varying opportunities for intimate exchanges.

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Ecological Contributions to Gender Differences in Intimacy Among Peers

Children's relationships with their peers become more intimate with age. These age differences have been explained largely in terms of age-related changes in children's social skills, perspective taking and motivation to achieve intimacy (e.g., Sullivan, 1953). However, in view of the findings that girls tend to experience intimacy in their friendships at an earlier age than do their male counterparts, it may be useful to examine other factors that may be operating (e.g., Buhrmester & Furman, 1987).

One possibility is that gender differences in intimacy come about as a result of structural characteristics of the peer environment. For example, boys tend to play in larger groups making it more difficult for intimate exchanges to occur (Lever, 1976). Further, boys and girls engage in activities that differ in levels of competitiveness, complexity, and number of participants (Lever, 1978; Zarbatany, Hartmann, & Rankin, 1990). Gender differences in activities result in the potentiation of different psychological processes. For example, noncompetitive activities may facilitate the development of intimate relationships with peers, whereas competitive activities may hinder intimacy development (Zarbatany et al., 1990).

Gender differences in the friendship composition of children's play groups also may relate to gender differences in intimacy. Eder and Halinan (1978) noted that girls tend to play

primarily with friends, whereas boys' play groups are composed of friends and non-friends. Differences in group composition may provide children with varying opportunities for intimate exchanges.

In summary, various structural characteristics of the peer environment, including group size, activity, and group relationship composition may contribute to gender differences in intimacy development within preadolescent play groups. However, these ecological variables often are confounded in the natural environment. As a result, it is difficult to discern which of these factors is causally implicated in intimacy development, particularly when assessments are based on a single age group. For example, non-intimate activities (e.g., team sports) usually involve large groups of friends and non-friends whereas intimate activities (e.g., gossiping) typically involve smaller groups of closer friends. The present study attempted to separate these variables by recording naturally occurring age differences in group size, activity and group friendship composition from middle childhood to preadolescence. Our goal was to identify ecological factors that change with age in ways that parallel age-related gender differences in intimacy development.

METHOD

Children were recruited from one primarily white middle-class elementary school. There were 25 first-grade children (18 girls) ranging in age from 5.98 to 7.29 years (M=6.32), 23 third-grade children (11 girls) ranging in age from 7.97 to 8.92 years

(*M*=8.52) and 38 fifth-grade children (15 girls) ranging in age from 9.87 to 10.93 years (*M*=10.46). Due to low levels of participation in Grades 1 and 3, friendship assessments (i.e., friendship nominations) were possible only for fifth-grade children. The friendship nomination questionnaire was administered individually to each subject and involved asking children to circle the names of each grademate whom they considered their friend.

Two independent observers conducted playground observations during recess over a 4-month period for activity and group size. A total of nine scans was obtained for each subject. For all children, group size and activity was noted for each scan. Groups were coded as having 1, 2, 3, 4, or 5 or more members, including the participant. Activities were categorized as socializing (conversation), competitive play (e.g., baseball), physical play (e.g., tag, catch), passive play (e.g., reading, stickers), solitary/onlooker (alone, watching others play), or other (activity not defined by the coding system).

Friendship composition of the peer group was noted for fifth-grade children based on friendship nominations. Group composition was categorized as bilateral friends (i.e., reciprocally nominated peers), unilateral friends (i.e., nonmutually nominated peers), non-friends, as well as several combined categories including bilateral and unilateral friends, friends and non-friends, or other (alone or children not involved in study). Observer agreement for coding of the ecological

variables based on overlapping coding of 20% of the scans ranged from 92% to 100%.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Consistent with past research (Lever, 1976), boys played most often in groups of four or more (63%) and girls in groups of two or three (58%; see Table 1). However, the homogeneity of these patterns across age suggests that decreasing group size is not a likely explanation for increasing female intimacy in preadolescence. Indeed, fifth-grade (but not younger) girls spent a considerable amount of time in groups of four or more (44%), not unlike their male counterparts (56%).

In contrast, age differences in children's peer activities related logically to age-related gender differences in intimacy (see Table 2). In first grade, boys and girls were most likely to engage in active and passive play (65%). However, with increasing age, boys participated primarily in competitive sports and physical play, and girls in socializing activities. Due to the difference in the potential for intimate exchange inherent in these two activity types, this may influence both the skill with which intimacy is achieved and the motivation to achieve it.

The friendship composition of fifth-grade children's play groups indicated that, as would be expected, socializing activities occurred most often among reciprocal friends (35%) whereas physical and competitive activities occurred in mixtures of friends and non-friends (80%; see Table 3). Because friendship nominations unfortunately were unavailable for the

younger children, it was not possible to ascertain whether age changes in group friendship composition map onto changes in intimacy. This remains a question for future research.

These data, although correlational, intimate that children's peer activities may be among the most potent peer ecological influences on gender differences in the development of intimacy. Females' socializing activities may propel preadolescent girls toward high levels of intimacy, complementing adult and societal pressure on girls to adopt an expressive, nurturant orientation (Lever, 1978; Maccoby, 1988), and cognitive maturational changes that enable mutual psychological exploration (Berndt, 1982). In contrast, boys' competitive activities may direct them away from intimacy toward the adult male instrumental orientation (Maccoby, 1988). Confirmation of these and other causal assertions regarding effects of peer activity participation on social and personality development currently is underway in our laboratory.

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Table 1
Percentage of Scans for Each Group Size by Grade and Gender

	Grade					
	1		3		5	
Group Size	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls
1	5	9	2	12	13	4
2	13	30	10	30	16	25
3	16	26	15	35	16	26
4	19	11	11	10	12	21
5+	48	24	61	13	44	24

Note. Column totals for boys and girls in each grade may not add up to 100% due to rounding.

Table 2

Percentage of Scans for Each Activity by Grade and Gend :

	Grade					
	1		3		5	
Activity	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls
Socializing	3	30	4	45	13	59
Competitive Play	15	--	33	3	35	7
Physical Play	54	34	43	28	24	20
Passive Play	19	26	10	7	3	4
Solitary/Onlooker	6	9	6	10	17	8
Other	3	1	4	6	8	2

Note. Column totals for boys and girls in each grade may not add up to 100% due to rounding.

Table 3

Percentage of Scans for each Activity by Friendship Composition

	Friendship Composition					
Activity	Bilateral only	Unilateral only	Non-Friends only	Mixed Friends	Friends & Non-Friends	Other
Socializing	35	3	21	7	18	16
Competitive Play	5	--	11	3	80	1
Physical Play	27	3	15	9	28	18
Passive Play	25	--	8	8	25	33
Solitary/Onlooker	17	2	9	--	9	63
Other	16	5	26	--	11	42

Note. Row totals for each activity may not sum to 100% due to rounding.